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Bible, Guns, and Land: Sovereignty and nationalism amongst the Nagas of India.

Abstract

This paper will argue that to understand Naga sovereignty, one must take into account the intimate connection between Christianity and nationalism. This relationship is centred on the idea of 'Nagaland for Christ', a central slogan (also seen as a covenant) for all Naga nationalist groups. It suggests that God is the primary agent in sovereignty, and that the land is connected with the idea of Nagaland for Christ. I argue that national territory is not an object or a place that can be fixed in time, but rather an act of narration and imagination with the power to shape where it belongs. I will make the case that we need to rethink modular forms of sovereignty that are based on a strong national state. Instead it would be more useful to think about sovereign territories as the organisation of space, or territoriality (Sack 1986). Robert Sack argues that territoriality is 'intimately related to how people use the land', how they 'organize themselves in space and how they give meaning to place' (Sack 1986: 2). If history has shown us that ascertaining the precise territorial lines of national units are always a challenge, it is more helpful to try and understand how people give meaning to place regardless of boundaries.

Introduction

Draped in a traditional Naga shawl, the Prime Minister of India Narendra Modi, along with 23 other dignitaries, smiles for the camera on the 3rd August 2015. The occasion is the signing of the historic peace accord, popularly known as the 'framework agreement', between the Government of India (GOI) and the Nationalist Socialist Council of Nagalim, Isak-Muivah (NSCN-IM). After 18 years of peace negotiations beginning in 1997 and armed conflict that began in the 1950s, the Naga war with the Indian state is one of the longest in the world, stretching across almost 60 years. The framework agreement was an attempt to re-energise the 1997 ailing peace process and to find a final solution to the protracted conflict.

At the heart of the discussion was that of Naga sovereignty as a birth-right, something the Nagas have upheld since their movement for independence began in the 1940s. According to the media, under discussion was the issue of a pan-Naga 'autonomy' for the different Naga tribes of India.¹ A year after the 'framework agreement', the Minister of State for Home, Kiren Rijiju, told the *Hindu* newspaper that sovereignty was no longer on the table and instead, the Nagas want a settlement within the Indian constitution.² Thuingaleng Muivah the general secretary for the NSCN-IM however emphasised that they had not given up their demands for sovereignty, despite Rijiju's remarks.³ While these conflicting statements over sovereignty do not help matters, equally perplexing are the terms of the framework agreement which remain undisclosed. Confounding and indeed unclear, has the 2015 peace accord settled matters or is it

¹ <http://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-others/govt-signs-peace-accord-with-nscnim-pm-narendra-modi-says-historic/>

² <http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/nscn-has-not-given-up-on-sovereignty-says-muivah/article8820302.ece>

³ Ibid.

just political staging? This grand political gesture cannot satiate the unique demands of the Naga people and indeed it cannot capture the history of the conflict in frame-by-frame camera smiles and handshakes. It requires a more thorough examination in order to place the specific mechanisms of nation building in sharp contrast to the kind of grand gesturing that Modi with a Naga shawl displays. So how did the Nagas and the GOI arrive at this juncture?

In order to understand the larger geopolitical situation, this paper will argue that to understand Naga sovereignty, one must take into account the intimate connection between Christianity and nationalism. This relationship is centred on the idea of 'Nagaland for Christ', a central slogan (also seen as a covenant) for all Naga nationalist groups. It suggests that God is the primary agent in sovereignty, and that the land is connected with the idea of Nagaland for Christ. I argue that national territory is not an object or a place that can be fixed in time, but rather an act of narration and imagination with the power to shape where it belongs. I will make the case that we need to rethink modular forms of sovereignty that are based on a strong national state (Shaw 2008; Robbins 2006; Muehlebach 2001; Chatterjee 1993; Deleuze and Guattari 1987). Instead it would be more useful to think about sovereign territories as the organisation of space, or territoriality (Sack 1986). Robert Sack argues that territoriality is 'intimately related to how people use the land', how they 'organize themselves in space and how they give meaning to place' (Sack 1986: 2). If history has shown us that ascertaining the precise territorial lines of national units are always a challenge, it is more helpful to try and understand how people give meaning to place regardless of boundaries.

What this means in the nationalist narrative is twofold: that Nagaland becoming a land of missions – sending Christian missionaries all over the world – and territorial independence are two sides of the same coin (Longkumer forthcoming). Furthermore, the idea of Nagaland for Christ is contrasted largely with what the nationalists perceive as 'Hindu-India'. This perception is pivotal in resisting the larger resonating force of the Indian nation-state since the start of the Naga independence movement in the 1940s, which accelerated under the military excess and armament in the region from the 1950s onwards. Like most nationalist movements, constructing an 'other' through which one's identity is strengthened and crystallised is a useful tactic. Here, the Indian state and its military machine is portrayed as the 'Hindu-other' oppressing the Nagas. This hegemony is associated with the forceful military tactics and the draconian Arms Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) which gives unprecedented military power. In the case of the Nagas (and the larger Northeast of India) it has meant that the Indian military has used AFSPA with impunity (Kikon 2009; McDuie-Ra 2009). The context of understanding Naga nationalism must therefore take into consideration the conditions created by

militarisation. I begin by elaborating on Naga identity, whether it is primordial or modern, and how this discussion continues to polarise opinions. Second, I will examine the history of Naga nationalism by noting important events and providing a context to understand the link between Naga nationalism and Christianity. Finally, I will examine the idea of 'Nagaland for Christ' and how the Nagas' notion of sovereignty is premised very much on this idea.

Nagas of India and Burma

The Nagas live between the lower ranges of the Eastern Himalayas in the borderlands of Northeast India and Northwest Burma (Myanmar). The label 'Naga' includes a number of ethnic groups, speaking a variety of Tibeto-Burman languages. Approximately two million Nagas live in India, and a hundred thousand or so in Myanmar's Sagaing Division and Kachin state. Ambiguity over the term 'Naga' has never been satisfactorily resolved as it was a name not used by the Nagas themselves (see Woodthorpe 1881). There are those who argue that Naga collective identity is a modern political, cultural, or 'invented' category (Baruah 2003) shaped primarily by the forces of colonialism and post-colonialism. Alan Macfarlane (2005) suggests that the various Nagas after millennia of wandering ended up in the hills of the Eastern Himalayas and only recently coalesced in the patterns the British constructed. Others reject outside historical agents as the sole factor responsible for 'creating' a Naga identity. They argue that the Nagas share some common ancestry underpinned by migration stories and creation myths (Iralu 2000; Pamei 2001). For example, Makhel in the Mao Naga region of Manipur state in India is recognised as the place of origin for many Southern and Western Nagas. Amongst the Northern and Eastern Nagas, the creation myth of Longtrok (in Chuliyimti, Northeast Nagaland), six stones shaped as male and female reproductive organs, is believed to be their place of origin (Saul 2005: 20-23).

Reflecting on South African identity formations, Terence Ranger (1993) comments that rather than focus solely on the 'invention of tradition' as colonialism's legacy to enclose the previous dynamism of tradition, it is vital to historicise the ongoing 'imagining and re-imagining of tradition'. In other words, if we are left to adopt a colonial classification or 'invention' of the term 'Naga' as the only authentic enumeration of identity, then we deny the Nagas active historical agency. On the other hand, privileging Naga narratives *prima facie* uncritically will lead to a form of parochialism that precludes the influence of outside historical forces. This helpful pointer by Ranger can be useful in the Naga case, particularly in understanding the dynamism of Naga identity without foreclosing the internal and external processes of identity iteration.

Articulating national identity

Various Naga authors (Yonuo 1974; Alemchiba 1970; Horam 1988) have remarked that the shared experience in the Labour Corps during World War I was responsible for a collective and broader sense of Naga belonging. Around 4,000 Nagas were sent to France as part of the Labour Corps, and saw 'civilised nations' fight for their own honour while condemning Naga conflicts as barbarous, petty squabbles. This experience provided a reason for political unification to represent their claim to the world (Yonuo 1974). Upon returning home, they formed the Naga Club in 1919 informally supported by the local British administrators and organised primarily by Naga Christian educated government officials and several headmen around the two principal villages – Mokokchung and Kohima. When the Simon Commission headed by Sir John Simon, a British politician, came to Kohima in 1929, to seek opinions on the future of India, twenty Naga tribes signed and submitted a memorandum that stated:

...We pray that the British Government will continue to safeguard our rights against all encroachments...that we should not be thrust to the mercy of the people [i.e. India] who could never have conquered us themselves, and to whom we are never subjected; but to leave us alone to determine for ourselves as in ancient times (Alemchiba 1970: 164).

Around 17 years later, at the centre of this debate regarding Naga independence was Jawaharlal Nehru, the first Prime Minister of India, and the president of the Indian National Congress (INC). Sensing that something had to be done about the 'tribal' Naga areas of Northeast India, Nehru wrote to T. Sakhrie (the General Secretary of the Naga National Council [NNC] formed in February 1946) on 1st August 1946. In his letter, Nehru explained his view that the Naga territory was too small to be politically and economically independent. Nehru strongly insisted on the integration of the Nagas within the Indian union and Indian laws. This certainty of Nehru's position regarding the Naga Hills, departed from Gandhi who supported an independent 'Naga area': '...If you do not wish to join the Indian Union...The Congress Government will not do that' (quoted in Venuh 2005: 67). Things were uneven on the ground between the loosely articulated INC stand of no forced integration (maintained by its leader Gandhi) to those that were coming from other avenues. For example, the British administrator Mildred Archer in 1947 canvassed the opinion of the then Assam Governor, Akbar Hydari, who was in charge of the Naga Hills, which would later go on to form Nagaland, regarding independence for the Nagas in 1947: 'They have got to come in. If they revolt; we shall shoot them up. It will be a pity but it will not be our fault; We couldn't give Nagas residual Powers...A Naga Government is out of the question...' (quoted in Franke 2006: 73).

Although things were at a stalemate, the NNC entered into dialogue with Governor, Hydari, and the '9-Point Agreement' was drawn up in June 1947 that recognised the right of the NNC to run

the affairs of the Nagas. The main bone of contention was point 9 – that is with regard to the political future of the Nagas. It stated that the Governor of Assam would act as a special agent between the GOI and the Nagas for a period of ten years, after which the NNC would take a decision regarding the future of the Nagas. The NNC thought that this clause would enable them to opt out of the Indian union in 10 years. This was subsequently denied by the GOI. As a symbolic protest to Indian hegemony, the Nagas declared independence on 14th August 1947 – the day before Indian independence – signed by 9 members of the NNC.

In many ways the year 1949 marked a crucial period for the GOI and the NNC. In 1949 the chief minister of Assam, Gopinath Bordoloi, informed the NNC that the GOI had never accepted the 9-point agreement. This was seen by the NNC as a betrayal and it is at this juncture that the more moderate NNC members lost ground and a clear majority now wanted total and complete independence. A plebiscite in 1950, conducted by the NNC, was meant to echo this sentiment whereby it was recorded that 99.9 percent of the Nagas in the Naga Hills supported independence. This move was summarily ignored by the GOI. The President of the NNC, Zapuphizo, met Nehru again in 1952 by which time the situation had worsened, and relations broke down further with the GOI now blaming the British and American Baptist missionaries who missionised the Nagas, for encouraging Naga independence (Franke 2006: 74; Jacobs 1998: 159; Longkumer forthcoming 'Along Kingdom's Highway').

The years 1950-56 saw armed escalation on both sides, with military skirmishes first reported on 25th March 1955 (Iralu 2000: 87). This was marked by the formation of the Federal Government of Nagaland (FGN) in 1956, the political wing of the NNC, which acted as the de facto Government for the Nagas. However, differences to independence arose, resulted in the formation of the Naga People's Convention (NPC), which supported Naga statehood within the Indian union. In 1963 the new state of Nagaland was inaugurated. The creation of statehood further legitimised the position of the GOI who refused to retreat from their idea of national integration, only causing further divisions with the NNC.

By 1956 a hundred thousand Indian soldiers were deployed in the Naga Hills to suppress an elusive and tiny guerrilla force of a few thousands with casualties reported on both sides. The introduction of the 1958 Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) into Nagaland, already classified as a 'disturbed area' in 1956, introduced unprecedented powers to stop, search and shoot to kill as necessary. This only fuelled mistrust and disdain of the Indian military. Kanwar Randip Singh, a former Indian officer, who served in the Naga Hills from 1953-57, says that none of the Indian officers mixed with the Nagas nor learned their way of life. 'In fact, they

considered these people as subhuman, filthy and not worth mixing [with]...a big gap was created between the Nagas and the government after the British left' (quoted in Glancey 2011: 180). Another view from John Bosco Jasokie, a former Chief Minister of Nagaland, interprets what these attitudes have meant for the Nagas.

They [the plains people of Hindustan] believe that their way of life is the right way...[and] are not prepared to accept us as human beings and, therefore, it is easier for them to go out of all human decency in their dealings with us...they think that by harassing the people they have done a great service to India, but actually India lost the friendship of the people (quoted in Glancey 2011: 181).

Following on from political dialogues, and military operations in the region, the Council of the Baptist Churches of Nagaland in 1964 initiated the Peace Council of Nagaland, comprising eminent Naga figures, which tried to bring the various parties to the peace table (see also Thomas 2016). Peace talks collapsed in 1966 due to the uncompromising, and rival, claims of territorial sovereignty and the NNC was banned by the GOI in 1972. With increased Indian military pressure, the controversial 'Shillong Accord' was signed in Shillong on 11 November 1975 between the GOI and the FGN of Nagaland. This required the surrender and disarmament of the NNC and the de facto 'official' recognition of the constitution of India. During this time, a group of Nagas went to China on a 'goodwill mission' primarily to receive military training and procure arms. When they heard about these events, they immediately denounced the NNC as traitors to the Naga cause and formed their own group known as the NSCN (the Nationalist Socialist Council of Nagaland) under the leadership of Isak Swu, T. Muivah, and S.S. Khaplang on 31 January 1980. Due to internal conflicts, Khaplang, a Naga from Burma, split from the NSCN in 1988 to form his own group (NSCN-K). The remaining group came to be known as the NSCN-IM, after their leaders, Isak Swu and T. Muivah. Currently the latter is the most powerful group in the region.

On 1st August 1997, fifty years after the conflict began, a ceasefire was signed between the GOI and the NSCN-IM, and political negotiation at the highest level; the 'framework agreement' is a consequence of these talks. So far the talks have included the main – but contentious – point of Nagalim (or 'Greater Nagaland') that includes Naga inhabited areas of Nagaland, Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur and Burma. The context and the unfolding of events are important to establish a timeline that elaborates on how the struggle of Naga independence evolved, particularly its relation to territoriality as a set of practices, identifying people's ties to land.

Sovereignty and ordering difference

In textbook definitions, sovereignty usually means that the sovereign – a person, organisation, or institution – decides on all matters relating to lawful conduct and adjudicates on the

legitimate use of coercion (Graham 2008: 13). Sovereignty as a political concept then is central to questions of authority. The state not only has the rightful authority but also the exercise of power. Thomas Hobbes (1588 – 1679), the English political philosopher, articulated this position most effectively in his magnum opus, *Leviathan*. Hobbes argued that the main effects of producing sovereignty are the ordering of difference that secures and safeguards a 'sovereign unit'. Through flattening and ordering time and space, sovereignty, for Hobbes, is a civic response to the divine authority of God. By bracketing religious authority, sovereignty as a political doctrine is made explicit (Shaw 2008: 37). For Hobbes all people are capable of commonwealth (sovereignty) exemplified by progress, order, culture, art and science. This Hobbesian notion is very much centred on "man" as a "knowing subject": 'the subject (who knows with authority) and the sovereign state (who embodies/ guarantees this authority)' (Shaw 2008: 36).

Such Hobbesian conceptions however are limited and can function within the confines of a national state reinforced by the 'European myth' of Cartesian and cartographic political borders (Leach 1960: 49-68; Wouters 2016: 104). Indeed, many studies of sovereignty from across Asia have noted their distributive nature – concepts such as 'galactic' (Tambiah 1997); 'theatre state' (Geertz 1980); 'anarchic' (Scott 2009) – that have usefully provincialized (Chakrabarty 2000) the political discourse of Hobbesian sovereignty of flattening difference in order to achieve order. In the Naga case, as Jelle Wouters (2016) has shown, the overlapping territorial and sovereign claims not only confounded the British administrators in the early 19th century, but that they also recognised the 'indigenous polity of the region' (Misra 2011). Even amongst contemporary Naga movements and organisations such as the Naga Hoho, Naga Assembly, and the nationalist groups, all have an interpretation of what Naga territoriality means that draws on present realities to shape the past, instead of allowing the past to shape the present. For example, in a booklet, *The Bedrock of Naga Society* (2003), published by the Nagaland Pradesh Congress Committee, S.C. Jamir (the main author), the former chief minister of Nagaland, stoked the flames of nationalism by questioning the primordial unity of the Naga nation since time immemorial. He asked if the Nagas had 'a political existence at all immediately before the British rule or even during the British days? Were we really an independent nation?' Words ignite flames and even draw blood. He was quickly reprimanded by different organisations with the Naga Student Federation (NSF) burning copies of his booklet, while the NSCN-IM made an attempt on his life – Jamir was labelled a traitor to the national cause. But Jamir's stance, though modernist in its articulation (Anderson 1991; Gellner 1983), comes back to the question of what sovereignty and independence means in the context of political discourse where there is a sense in which the fixed boundaries of the nation are what matters. Here is the tension between the

modernist (Jamir) and the primordialist (NSF/NSCN-IM) positions are at the heart of the national project that takes us back to the earlier discussions about Naga identity and its different iterations.

The question of the fixity of identity then, to some extent, is also reliant on a territorially defined place. But in the Naga case, this is not easy to define. Even in the NNC Yehzabo (Constitution) the issue of territorial jurisdiction remains ambiguous as it simply states – ‘The territory of Nagaland shall comprise all the territories of the Nagas...’ (Article 1, NNC 2006). The subjective nature of ‘the territories of the Nagas’ then begs the question: who is a Naga and by extension which territories? The history of the Naga cause has demonstrated different versions of who is a Naga by virtue of the nationalist group one is in. For instance some question whether Manipuri Nagas can be an integral part of the Naga nationalist movement (Wouters 2016: 111). Others question the territorial integrity of ‘Nagaland’, especially with the recent demand of the eastern tribes of Nagaland to separate and form a ‘Frontier Nagaland’ state. All of these factors complicate the difficult territorial balance inherited by the colonial, and maintained by the post-colonial, nation-states (see Sammadar 2009; Chasie 2005; Horam 1988). Finding a one size fits all idea of sovereignty that is congruent with the political, cultural and territorial reality is not always feasible as one can see in postcolonial states, where previous borders are now being questioned to capture their haphazard process and where the resilience of maintaining a ‘unique’ identity has come to the forefront of national imaginaries. This is not to suggest that territorial boundaries are unhelpful, but merely to point out the difficulties in ascertaining precisely where the lines can be drawn.

What the discussion so far suggests is that the Naga movement, in its development, has gone through different phases, and the question of sovereignty, independence and self-determination in the political language of nation-states have tended to be the visible and official presence. However, if we are to seek an alternative archive – as a set of ideas – an archive that has largely eluded mainstream politics of audit, governance, and timelines, the role Christianity plays needs to be assessed because firstly it is related closely with Naga nationalism, and secondly it provides alternative notions of sovereignty and land that has the power to shape nationalist narratives of place, not solely determined by political boundaries of the nation-state.

Christianity and nationalism

According to the Yehzabo (constitution) of the NNC:

We, the people of Nagaland, solemnly acknowledge that the Sovereignty over the earth and the entire universe belongs to Almighty God alone, and the authority of the people to be exercised on the territory is a sacred trust from God, who sustained our

forefathers, the national workers and our people through the years...(NNC 2006 preamble).

The expression of a clear Christian identity in the preamble of the NNC is significant because it acknowledges the far-reaching influence of Christianity on national life. The coming of Christianity to the then Naga hills in the mid-19th century through the American Baptist Missionaries under the aegis of the American Baptist Foreign Missionary Society (ABFMS) was a momentous act for many Naga nationalists. Not only did they introduce Christianity, but they also brought modern education, and a sense of identity vis-à-vis other nations. The ability to articulate their first written expressions of Naga independence through the Simon Commission report of 1929 is a demonstration of this. In talking to me at length of this 'cosmic plan' by God, a retired NNC General, told me that the coming of the American Baptists to the Naga hills was not happenstance. The Americans, he said, were actually interested in going to the Shan area of Burma and then onto China. But instead they came to Nagaland. This statement is confirmed by Mary Clark's account of the beginning of missionary work amongst the Nagas: 'From the beginning it was never contemplated stopping alone with these tribes bordering on the frontier; but on and on...these Mountains should be spanned and the kingdom of our Lord extended from the Brahmaputra to the Irawady, and from the Irawady to the Yangtze' (1907: 135). The fact that the ABFMS played a role in instigating Naga nationalism is a question that has not really been addressed, partly because the ABFMS did not want to portray itself as involved in indigenous politics, particularly since they were merely guests of the British and then the Indian state. Their emphasis on social justice, conversion, education and civilization portrayed an international outlook in an effort to shy away from interfering in nationalist politics of the region they were involved in (Stanley 2009). But it inadvertently helped create a national consciousness amongst the Nagas. This dilemma is recorded by one of the ABFMS missionaries, B.I. Anderson in 1945 wrote:

Our Christian young people were especially vocal in their presentation of this demand [of Naga independence], this was due to their superior training as compared to those who had not accepted the Christian religion...the day had also dawned when the younger churches were given more self determination and the organizational changes in the Mission gave the national leaders more prominence and greater power. In the planning session of the Mission much spadework was toward a gradual integration of different groups into a strong Christian movement, leaving politics to be taken care of as opportunities arose. But we were not always successful in our desire to guide the churches (Anderson n.d.: 68).

There is other evidence in the ABFMS archives to suggest this close association of Christianity with the independence movement. Robert Delano working with the Sumi Nagas says in 1953, six years after the independence movement started, says that, 'Some of the people who are

active in the independence movement are also leaders in our Christian work'.⁴ More work is required to tease out these connections (see Downs 2010), which, at least from the evidence in the ABFMS archives, are not always explicitly recorded. They feared that any interference in indigenous politics would compromise their activities. Regardless of their cautiousness, the ABFMS were asked to leave by the Indian Government because of what they saw as meddling with the Naga independence struggle through their support of the Christian Naga nationalists trained in their schools.

But the main point I want to make is that Christianity attracted the Nagas in a number of complex ways. It was not simply the unique identity of the Nagas that accelerated the idea of a nation, but associating with a religion like Christianity brought about 'transcendental values' (Peel 2003: 281). Exposure to European modernity through the colonial experience, but particularly through the adoption of Christianity brought about the idea of looking at 'nations' as distinct from other 'nations'. It is helpful to recall the way in which the missionaries' own views were influenced by the prevailing idea of the 'nation' inherited from the New Testament – 'to the Gentiles' was literally 'to the nations/peoples' (Peel 2003: 281). Translating the Christian gospel thus meant an acceptance of peoples or 'nations as naturally given units to which the Church must speak' (ibid). Amongst the Nagas, the first American missionary E.W. Clark, had this to say, 'if these wild Nagas were given proper education and if they accepted the Christian religion, they would become a great nation' (cited in Ao 1970: 14). For the missionaries, the notion of a 'great nation' went hand in hand with proselytizing and civilising that introduced western notions of time, hygiene, clothes and habits, as well as education which to many Naga nationalists was the 'greatest gift', as discussed earlier.

At the same time as intense Indian military operations and the ongoing resistance from 1947 to the 1970s, there was a substantial rise in the scale of conversions to Baptist Christianity among the Nagas of Nagaland. Although the numbers of Christian conversions were nothing revelatory until 1941 (17.9% from a population of around 189,641), a sharp rise in Christian numbers post-1941 has a story to tell. In 1951 there was an increase to around 52.9%, an additional 30% in ten years. The increase in the Christian population was steady from then on with 80.2% recorded in 1981 (Eaton 2000: 48), and in 2001 the number was almost 95%, mainly made up of Baptists, Presbyterians, Roman Catholics and Pentecostals. It was Christianity that provided the majority of Nagas with some internal cohesion and gave them a 'moral authority' that superseded parochial 'tribal' loyalties, and territorial divide.

⁴ FM 376 Delano ABHSA

One of the direct ways in which Christianity became central to Naga nationalism was the brutal tactics of the Indian military that grouped villages together, or Regrouped Villages (RGV). It was a tactic borrowed from the British in fighting the Malay communist insurgency in 1950. It separated villagers from the 'insurgents' by concentrating small villages together into one location, followed by close monitoring from the military who controlled who went in and out (Lintner 2012: 67). At the same time, Christian revivals were spreading all over Nagaland. The revivals were an occasion for self-introspection and a recommitment to Christ, accompanied by singing, dancing, and prophesying about future events. These 'groupings' brought different villages together and they participated in these revival meetings that provided an alternative vision of what it meant to be human and loved, in contrast to the brutal military tactics on display. This is how Lanu Longchar, a long time evangelist and a NNC worker, discussed it with me in an interview before his death in 2016:

Village life, without knowing, came together. Unlike the olden days without the love of God, the revival brought together people. Revival affected the moral law and the governance during that time. During that time NNC was also beautiful - like the revival it was grassroots. NNC was like church work - it was beautiful.

Although these revival activities, accompanied by the rise of the NNC in the villages, gave a sense of the Nagas' destiny as a people under 'moral law', the aggression of the Indian military, particularly through their targeting of churches, remain as scars on the Nagas and memory of it still resides in the public imagination of an 'Hindu state' destroying and undermining the very symbols of a people's faith. The historian John Thomas (2016) and other Naga scholars such as Kaka Iralu (2000) have compiled accounts of these, and I will briefly discuss one or two to give a sense of the atrocities.

On 6 June 1956, the village of Longpha was raided. The deacon of the church, Mr. Imtilepsuk and seven other church leaders were tied to posts, tortured and shot dead by a firing squad...Incidents such as these were always made into public spectacles and the symbolism of many people being tortured by being tied on a post, with hands stretched, like a crucifix did not fail to make an impression on the people...at the junction of two roads in Mokokchung, five men were tied to posts, wrists to wrists, hands stretched in crucifix fashion and shot dead in full view of the public. Moreover, church buildings were generally turned into torture chambers and church altars were desecrated (Thomas 2016: 123).

It was during this period that the NNC attracted large numbers to their cause for Naga independence. Alongside this, the NNC leader, Phizo, was also a charismatic recruiter. He would travel from village to village all over the Naga areas. On one occasion during this period in the 1950s, Phizo arrived at an Ao village, Chungliyimsen. Tia, a teenager at that time, recalls this event. Phizo asked the villagers if they wanted independence and to have control over their resources, government, schools, and access to modern technology like cars and trains, and the

crowd replied 'Yes'. Then, he would pose a serious question to the ready audience, 'So, do you want to go to the jungle and fight the Indian army?' Yes was the response and he would travel from village to village and make everyone enthusiastic. 'His politics was infectious', remembers Tia.

What was happening in the villages with regard to revivals and commitment to Christianity was also replicated in the jungle camps of the NNC. In the early days, gospel teams preached under armed guard and conducted many spiritual activities in these NNC camps. The NNC refused to fight on Sundays, due to the large numbers of pastors in their ranks. The UK newspaper Observer's Gavin Young, in his book *The Nagas: An Unknown War*, offers us vignettes of his experience in the nationalist camps in the 1960s. When the Naga platoon assigned to accompany him kneels down to pray, he remarks that it is akin to a 'Cromwellian ingredient in the Naga struggle', an expression related to Oliver Cromwell, the English military leader's fervent religiosity. In the camp, over the officer's mess were these words: 'Praise God from whom all blessings flow, Praise him all creatures here below' (quoted in Glancey 2011: 183). The NNC even created a Naga flag with a rainbow intersecting a blue sky, a reference to God's covenant with Noah in Genesis, symbolised here as God's covenant with the Nagas.⁵ Accounts by Gavin Young and Bertil Lintner (see below) provide us with useful glimpses of life in these camps. Both show the close connection between the political activities of the nationalists and the intimate relation to their identities as Christians. It is this Christian spirit that drives the Naga cadres to resist the Indian military onslaught, which gradually becomes more fervent and entrenched, demonstrated by the slogan 'Nagaland for Christ'.

Nagaland for Christ

If the sovereignty of the Nagas is to be understood as connected to God's actions in the world, then the iconic slogan 'Nagaland for Christ' is not simply a placeholder but is emblematic of the Nagas' partnership with God. During the Swedish journalist Bertil Lintner's month long stay in the NSCN headquarters – Kesan Chanlam – in Burma in 1980s, he recounts how Isak Swu the President of the NSCN shows him 'the Iphai Missionary Centre' and tells him:

The rulers of India and Burma will be like Herod of Egypt. If they don't obey God, it'll be to their own cost. Armies of rats will devour their lands. This God has told us. In 1982, God said he felt pity for the Nagas. At that time we had our headquarters on a hilltop in the jungle. 'I love you Nagas very much' God told us. 'I won't let you live in the jungle anymore. You must move down to an open place and build a new camp there. It should be called Iphai [untranslatable spiritual word] and you'll not have to worry about defending the place. I'll take care of that' God assured us...God protects us. He also told us to erect the big crucifix (Lintner 1990: 90).

⁵ Daily Herald, May 5, 2003.

Swu's account reveals a very particular notion of Christianity that has become central to the then NSCN and now the NSCN-IM ideology. Their 1980 Manifesto is perhaps the clearest sign of this.

1. Unquestionable rights of the Naga people over every inch of Nagaland.
2. Dictatorship of the people through the NSCN and practice of democracy as long as it is deemed necessary.
3. Faith in God and salvation of mankind through Jesus Christ.
4. Socialism and economic systems for the removal of exploitation and ensuring fair equality to all the people.
5. Rules out saving of Nagaland through peaceful means and pins its faith on arms to save the Nation and to ensure freedom to its people (quoted in Glancey 2011: 188).

This represents an odd conflation of Maoist socialist ideology, Christian salvationism ('Nagaland for Christ') and armed insurrection followed by an appeal to democracy, but only as a stepping-stone to 'dictatorship of the people'. This is a concept that remains unclear, though it could mean power at the hands of the people. It is Christian salvationism that has been the cornerstone for the NSCN-IM in their fight against the Indian state. However, not everyone was convinced by this manifesto as the threat of communism was debated by the Naga churches as early as the 1960s. Some feared the influence of China on the NNC who sought them as a new ally in their fight against the Indian military in procuring arms, training and logistical support. However, it was, in fact, these excursions into China, and the Naga churches reaction to them, that could be said to have brought about an increased zealotry in the NNC (and NSCN) articulating their Christian identity in their desire for sovereignty. Accusation of communist or atheist influence required the NNC to demonstrate how they were fighting to gain Nagaland for Christ.

The Chinese were more than willing to entertain their Naga neighbours, who entered Yunnan in 1967, posing as Christian peace mission workers and aided by local villagers and the Kachin Independence Army (KIA).⁶ Once they arrived, the Chinese border guards were perplexed but amazed to see a large contingent of dishevelled and weary looking soldiers with old Lee Enfield rifles inherited from World War II. Unable to communicate in Chinese, only three recognisable names of the Chinese political hierarchy – Mao Zedong, Lin Biao, and Zhou Enlai – were mentioned by Thuingaleng Muivah, the then General Secretary of the NNC, as a way to show their knowledge of Chinese political history, before the Chinese invited them for tea and biscuits (Lintner 2012: ix). Given that there were anti-religious sentiments spreading in China during the Cultural Revolution, it is surprising to note the Nagas were unperturbed by these developments. In Tengchong, where a training camp was established, near the Burma border,

⁶ Interview with Thinoselie Keyho: <http://www.nagalimvoice.com/interviews/%E2%80%98gandhi-supported-the-naga-desire-for-independence%E2%80%99/> (accessed 11th October 2017).

the Chinese authorities allowed the Nagas to construct a small wooden church where Christian hymns could be heard every Sunday morning (Lintner 2012: 38-39).

In May 1968, fearing the influence of Chinese communism on the NNC cadres, the Executive Secretary of the Naga Baptist Council of Churches (NBCC) produced a document against communism that was circulated widely amongst local churches. It highlighted the atheist nature of communism, and how key communist texts such as those of Karl Marx, Mao Tse Tung and Lenin might replace the Bible (Rao 1986: 88-9; Thomas 2016: 151-52). In response, General Mowu, a senior Naga officer who went to China, said: 'As we were NAGALAND FOR CHRIST, the communist Chinese had to built a CHURCH for us'. Mowu goes on to say that this was the first church built after the Chinese revolution and the 'first church planted by "Nagaland for Christ" in foreign land. Many Chinese came forward secretly to know about god and we were glad to proclaim His name to them' (Shimray 2005: 91). It is no surprise that Muivah, the General Secretary of the NNC, and later of the NSCN/NSCN-IM, after a few years in China, was influenced by socialism as the above manifesto clearly illustrates. But the churches back home remained suspicious.⁷ Therefore, in order to defend against the attack on the NNC/NSCN's links with communism, they effectively made 'Nagaland for Christ' a dominant ideology for the nationalist movement to protect against not only communism but Indian/Hindu hegemony. Thus, they would turn questions about their Christianity and national identity on their head by declaring that the NNC/NSCN were the only ones protecting Naga Christianity, while the church sits idly by and has become compromised by the corrupting forces of the Indian state (Thomas 2016: 171-175).⁸

Due to this complacency, the nationalists believed that the forces of India were slowly making inroads by firstly threatening the Nagas' food and cultural sovereignty. The NNC/NSCN said that the 'Hindu government' of India had adopted a policy of vegetarianism that would be enforced upon the Nagas whose main diet is pork. The NNC/NSCN also extended this 'Hindu' hegemony even to the trading community who were viewed as the 'teachers and instructors' of Hinduism, spreading religious texts such as the Bhagavad Gita. Finally, the entertainment business of Bollywood with their 'Hindi songs, films' were seen as corrupting the national youth. All of these activities were seen as conspiring to oust the Christian God, 'the eternal God of the Universe' (Shepoumaramth 1995: 273). To demonstrate their dedication to the Christian nation and by

⁷ Much of the ideology developed during the NNC period in the 60s have become a part of the NSCN, and later the NSCN-IM. I therefore refer both to the NNC/NSCN as sharing this ideology, as Swu and Muivah were the main ideologues of the later NNC (1960s onwards) and the NSCN in the 80s.

⁸ For Muivah, there is no contradiction between socialism and Christianity, which in some sense is what 'liberation theology' – that combines Marxist ideas with Christian teachings – attempted to achieve as it became popular in Latin America, Asia, and even amongst the Nagas (Nuh 1986).

setting themselves apart from these corrupting practices, the NNC and especially the NSCN preached a puritanical lifestyle that banned alcohol and drugs, and discouraged sexual promiscuity in an attempt to 'purify' the nation and to encourage God to fulfil his covenant of making 'Nagaland for Christ'. In order to establish this covenant, schools and clinics were established by the NSCN that went hand in hand with Christian teachings (Horam 1988: 76-77), and 'soldiers' conducted missionary activities in Burmese Naga territory by converting over 40,000 'animists' to Christianity (Shimray 2005: 159-69; Lintner 1990). Biblical names such as Zion, Canaan or the NSCN-IM headquarter Hebron, are used as camp names that signify the pervasiveness of Judeo-Christian symbols.

Closely connected with Nagaland for Christ is the idea of mission, that the Nagas have, by cosmic design, been positioned between China, Burma, Bangladesh, and India (seen as largely non-Christian countries) to spread the gospel (see also Freston 2001). Demonstrated by Mowu and his victorious celebration of the establishment of a church in post-cultural revolutionary China, this motif of mission is closely related to sovereignty. One of the key architects of the Nagaland Missions Movement founded in 1970 amidst the turbulent period of armed conflict, Alem Meren, when I interviewed him about the struggle for independence – that cost the Nagas over 5000 lives – shall not go to waste and that 'we have therefore enlisted 10,000 volunteers for Christ to fulfil the great commission'. This is a point I have argued elsewhere (xxx), which suggests that the strategic mobility of missionaries 'called' to a place is not by human design but by divine sanction, and the motivation for this calling being, in part, the impact it will have in the home territory with regard to sovereignty. This is an idea that many churches and prayer centres all over Nagaland have implemented.

One such prayer centre, called the Sumi Alakishi Kighinimi (SAK), who have close connections with the different nationalist groups, see their purpose as primarily praying for the establishment of 'Nagaland for Christ'. They view the independence of the Nagas as the beginning of their covenant with God in sending not only 10,000 missionaries, but as a national obligation. Their covenant of establishing Nagaland for Christ cannot function fully, argued Jacob, one of the members of SAK, primarily due to the fact that the 'Nagas are still under India'. Once independence is achieved, there will be a surge in missionary activities, particularly to communist China. In fact, they envision this relationship as a 'theocracy' where God is the sovereign over the Nagas. In fact, Isak Swu also pushed this idea forward in an interview with the American newspaper, *The Washington Diplomat*. He said that Nagaland will be a 'theocratic state' – ruled by the Holy Spirit and where the Bible will be the constitution (O'Driscoll 2003). In different ways, this idea appears in various media. In 2009, the 'Restore Nagaland for Christ

Crusade' was seen in one of Nagaland's main town Dimapur, organised by the United Christian Prayer Ministries (UCPM). Thuingaleng Muivah the General Secretary of NSCN-IM has reiterated, in many speeches and occasions, two central motifs: 'Nagaland for Christ' and 'the unique national rights of the Naga people' (often articulated as *Urra Uvie* [our land belongs to us]). Indeed, during his speech in Pughoboto in Zeneboto district of Nagaland on 24th June 2010 Muivah said: 'We [referring to himself and the Chairman Isak Swu] are united on two key foundations: 1) The will of Jehovah 2) Our land and the National Rights of the Naga people' (NSCN 2010: 36).

God, land, people

Although the Christian idea of Nagaland for Christ is the synecdoche of national life, the issue of land is tightly interwoven with this idea, giving Naga sovereignty its substance. The materiality of land, as I have suggested, is an act of narration and imagination with the power to shape where it belongs. Phizo in fact makes the point, during the early years of the NNC, that land is a sovereign entity for the Nagas – 'every Naga family has got their own house and lands for cultivation. No family need worry for land...The feeling of personal ownership with perfect liberty has ingrained in the life of our people. As a result, our nature hungers after absolute freedom' (quoted in Nuh 1986: 99). Eschewing colonial intervention that resulted in questioning this 'absolute freedom', Phizo laments the loss of this privilege by suggesting that 'this form of existence has much to do for our national struggle to remain independent without interference' (ibid: 99). The fact is that land, in turn connected to 'absolute freedom', is central to Phizo's notion of sovereignty. It is important to note that the Nagas always had sovereignty over their land – it is only with foreign 'intervention' first through the British, Americans and now the Indians that this tranquillity is disturbed. For the nationalists, they are not asking for any inch of the India, they simply want to be left alone in their own lands. In his 1951 plebiscite speech, Phizo says: 'The Nagas do not ask Independence from India; indeed, we do not want anything from India. India has nothing to give away to Nagaland. We are Independent and sovereign in our own national right. What we ask is not to interfere [in] our administration but leave us alone and allow Nagaland, the national state of the Nagas, to continue to exist in peace and make progress without hindrance'.⁹ But the question of land is not simply a secular object that lies dormant to be usurped by conquering forces, but an act of God that makes it precious to those who are fighting to protect it. The security and assurance over land is not lost on Phizo who acknowledges that 'I always have a feeling that God, our Heavenly Father – our creator – is

⁹ <http://www.neuenhofer.de/guenter/nagaland/phizo.html>

with us and guiding us'.¹⁰ In effect, land and God are intimately connected. Indeed, Muivah takes this idea one step further.

In an interview with the anthropologist Abraham Lotha, Muivah argues that because God created heaven and earth, God has allocated a land for the Nagas, and 'that portion particularly is this Patkoi range [hill range where Naga areas are] because we were made to settle down there...So Nagaland becomes homeland...Most precious' (Lotha 2017: 173). Explaining to Abraham Lotha that 'land' and 'Nagaland for Christ' are central to his idea of sovereignty, Muivah goes on to say that because 'Christ died for the Nagas and Nagaland' then Christ must be chosen. And all of this, he goes on, comes first from the will of God. Although, God's workings are often cosmic in purpose, at least here on earth one must have an identity that is God given: just like 'Jesus himself said, I'm a Jew'. And this, Muivah suggests, is primarily for identification. Just like God demarcated night from day, and light from darkness, so has God given the Nagas an identity that is 'God's will'. He continues: 'Naga land is not created by Indians, not created by the British, not created by Naga people too. So who made who, there must be a creator' (Lotha 2017: 174). Both Phizo and Muivah envisage a land that belongs to the Nagas. Their language is inflected with a Christian vision of God who is active in the world and who provides sanctuary and meaning in the face of immense odds. It is not simply that Christianity is an identity that is externalised to meet the demands of identity politics, but, as I have shown, Christianity provides not only a way of knowing God but also of navigating the complex world of national life. Translating this into everyday language and weaving this into the national narrative is a task that has occupied many in a quest to understand the complex changes – from British colonialism, Christian missionaries to the Indian state – experienced by the Nagas. Formulating an indigenous polity, one that is aware of the modular nationalist paradigm, and one that is always conscious of the relationships with land, people, and the cosmos, brings about a distinctive style of imagining the nation that is always first and foremost their own.

Conclusion

If the 'European myth' of cartographic political borders has influenced most notions of sovereignty, so too have the Nagas been involved in demarcating their national territories; a task which continues to absorb much of national life in present Nagaland and Naga inhabited areas. Even the 'framework agreement' with which I began indicates that the territorial question is very much at the forefront of discussions regarding sovereignty, with existing states such as Assam, Manipur, and Arunachal Pradesh, opposed to any alterations. Much like Naga nationalism that has been borne out of the confluence of modern political identities, and

¹⁰ *ibid.*

primordial notions of who a Naga is, so too has the territorial reach of the Naga land expanded – from village republics to a constellation of towns, cities, and regions that encompasses four Indian states and two countries. But unlike the Hobbesian notion of erasing God from the picture of how this sovereign body might be imagined, for the Nagas the sovereign body is centred on God as the agent of history, a point Muivah, and others, have asserted over many years. Indeed, one must acknowledge the power of indigenous polity, where Christian ideas of belonging, coupled with notions of land, cannot be devolved from sovereignty that requires that the ‘supernatural’, in Dipesh Chakrabarty’s words, be able to act in historical events (2000: 104).

The ability to organise space as a process of territoriality then is not only about how people use land, but ultimately how they organise space and give meaning to place. Something, I would argue, is what the Naga nationalists have been attempting to articulate. These articulations combine political discourse, emotive responses to interference and invasion, armed struggle against an enemy that they see as violating the principles of sovereignty of absolute freedom, and finally advocating a surrender to God as the ultimate agent, sovereign; all providing a way to substantiate both the purpose and promise of the Naga struggle. Although, one can suggest that the political praxis displayed in the signing of the ‘framework agreement’ illustrates the workings of the state and bureaucracy in the name of governance, what elides modern political discourse is an analysis of how the cosmos effects the workings of politics (Latour 2004). This is an idea that is not lost on various Naga nationalists. V.K. Nuh, an eminent church leader and nationalist activist, argues that ‘The political history of the Nagas begins with Christianity and must end with it’ (1986:4). Similarly, Muivah declared to the American newspaper, *Daily Herald*, ‘Although our problem with India is national and political in nature, the issue of faith inevitably turns out, when challenged, to be the most enduring force in the ultimate analysis’ (*Daily Herald*, 2003). I only wonder what was said in the secretive talks in 2015 between the Government of India and the Nagas? If anything, I hope the political grand gesturing and ritual performance that made the headlines that day were not the only markers, but that an intimate history of the workings of the cosmos were also on the table.

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